

United States Prison System A National Disgrace

WASHINGTON (AP) — "The correction system in the United States is a national disgrace. It corrects little. It rehabilitates few. It does nothing for most of the people who serve time in it. And it does precious little for the society which hopes it will prevent crime."

The words are those of Richard W. Velde, associate administrator of the Justice Department's Law Enforcement Assistance Administration.

The view is a consensus held and expressed by state and federal officials alike:

Degrading and brutal to those within, ignored and neglected by those without, America's prisons and jails are failing to rehabilitate criminals or protect the public.

From Attica in New York to San Quentin in California, 200,000 adult men and women are consigned to spend part of their lives behind prison walls.

From the Tombs in New York City to Orleans Parish Prison in New Orleans, another 1.5 million men, women and children pass through local jails each year, awaiting trial, sentencing or the end of a term.

Inside those walls, many of them built 100 or more years ago, they are exposed at best to poorly financed rehabilitation programs and minimum living conditions. At worst, they live in subhuman squalor, suffering sadistic brutality at the hands

of their keepers or fellow prisoners.

For most Americans, the minority behind bars is out of sight and out of mind. Out of mind, that is, until dramatically called to public attention by a riot or a revolt, such as that at Attica, where 40 men lost their lives.

Yet all but a mere 2 per cent of the prisoners will someday return to society where, according to official federal figures, 60 to 70 per cent of them will commit another crime.

Expensive to maintain, even more expensive to rebuild, America's 400 prisons and 4,000 jails are breeding grounds of crime and violence that present, in the words of President Nixon, "a convincing case of failure."

In 1870, the American Correctional Association resolved that "the aim of the prison should be to make industrious free men rather than orderly and obedient prisoners."

Yet 101 years later, despite the urgings of Nixon, Chief Justice Warren E. Burger and scores of others, that aim is unfulfilled.

Of the \$1.5 billion spent yearly on corrections in the United States, former Atty. Gen. Ramsey Clark estimates that 95 per cent goes for custodial costs: walls, bars and guards. The balance, Clark says, is spent on rehabilitation: education, job training and health services.

To be sure, conditions have improved since the American Correctional Association adopted its statement of purpose.

Corporal punishment is no longer official policy. Prison architects are designing minimum security facilities that eschew Bastille-like grimness.

Innovative training and educational programs are being adopted. Twenty states have work-release programs. Prison populations have declined in the past 10 years. An estimated 800,000 offenders who in earlier times might be behind bars are free on probation or parole.

Yet despite an 8 per cent decline in prison commitments in 10 years since the peak of 213,000 in 1960, Velde says most prisoners don't belong behind bars.

"The fact is that only between 10 and 25 per cent of those now in jails and prisons really belong there," he said. "The bulk of the prisoners now in custody, whatever their offense, should be in properly supervised probation or parole situations."

And all the enlightened penology of the 20th Century has not been able to prevent the disintegration of the human spirit among men subjected to privation and brutality.

Only last month, the Justice

Department joined inmates at Mississippi's Parchman State Prison in seeking a court ruling that conditions in the institution constitute cruel and inhuman punishment in violation of the Constitution.